Reconceptualizing Teaching by Integrating Philosophy for Children in Hawaiian Elementary School Classrooms

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Abstract. In this qualitative study, I explore the impact of integrating the Philosophy for Children Hawaii (p4cHI) approach to education and, in particular, teachers’ experiences in practicing it at Waikiki Elementary School in Hawaii. Data includes interview transcripts, email correspondences and personal memos. The analytic themes that emerged from the analysis of the data illustrate that p4cHI has successfully become a pedagogical model of teacher improvement, student cognitive, socio-emotional development and school betterment. p4cHI supports the development of a class that is characterized by an intellectually safe community of inquiry, not being in a rush, and a school culture that features caring, inclusivity and active participation by members of the community.

Introduction

In a movement to improve U.S. public education during the late 1960s, Matthew Lipman created Philosophy for Children (P4C) to help schools foster wonder, imagination, and inquiry throughout students’ academic careers. He wrote, P4C “will cease to treat children as passive blotters whose education consists merely of learning of inert data and will instead stimulate their capacity to think”. [1] In 1984, Thomas Jackson brought Lipman’s P4C to Hawaii islands and, ultimately, developed P4C into philosophy for children Hawaii—p4cHI. [2] p4cHI is a culturally responsive offshoot of Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp’s original P4C program. [3] Jackson’s refinement of the program responded to tensions and the cultural incongruence between Lipman’s novels, such as the limitations of the materials and curriculum, the grounding of the content in the Western philosophical tradition, Western content and practice, and the experiences of many children in Hawaii that arose while running P4C in a richly diverse, and multicultural community context. [4] Jackson articulated a concise set of classroom conditions and a flexible classroom practices that had made P4C more accessible to more educators whether or not they have formal experience with philosophy.

Research Questions

The study is designed to answer the following research questions: How have teachers, the principal, and the resident philosopher at WES experienced the application of p4cHI? What effects does p4cHI bring to teachers and WES?

Theoretical Framework – Philosophy for Children Hawaii

This study uses a philosophy for children Hawaii approach as the foundation and explore how the pedagogy impacts the teachers in the teaching process. The p4cHI approach to education is based on four pillars or guiding principles—community, inquiry, reflection, and philosophy, and a clearly presented set of flexible classroom practices that make it accessible to a vast amount of educators who may or may not have had previous experiences with philosophy. [2] It is these classroom practices that are essential to the Waikiki Elementary teaching practice. Among students and teachers, the most popular p4cHI activities from Jackson’s model are: [5]
- Fostering *Intellectual Safety* to make sure that all participants in the community feel they can ask any questions or state any points of view, which are only limited to being respectful of everyone in the circle (p. 460).
- Making and using a *Community Ball* (p. 461) to help mediate turn-taking during dialogue and inquiry in the classroom.
- Using the language of the *Good Thinker’s Tool Kit* to articulate questions, claims, and thinking in general (p. 463).
- Participating in *Plain Vanilla* discussion-based inquiries that follow the structure: generate questions, vote on which question they want to pose for the group, investigate and discuss the question, and finally develop assessment criteria to aid in a reflection of the inquiry (p. 462).
- Utilizing *Magic Words*—such as “GOS” (going off subject) and “LMO” (let’s move on) to support student facilitation during Plain Vanilla inquiries (p. 461).
- Reflecting on the *Community of Inquiry* with a set of evaluative questions—such as how was our inquiry? Was it a safe environment? to help measure progress (p. 464).

Jackson’s view toward philosophy and the roles of teachers and students differed vastly from Lipman [7] and his P4C colleagues, Sharp and Oscanyan’s [8] Western philosophical view. Lipman built his ideas of P4C as formulated from the Western philosophical position on developing reasoning skills by teaching logic. Jackson developed his viewpoints by bringing the concept of primal wonderment, the “little p” philosophy, the activity of co-inquiry between the teacher and students, the context and content sensitive learning experiences and self-corrective reflection into his p4c Hawaii. His p4c moved away from the Lipman novels and teacher manuals to the wondering, interests, and questions of student experience and background. [4]

**Methods**

The aim of this study, which is also the focus of my interview is to uncover respondents’ understanding of p4cHI and the impact p4cHI brings to teachers and the Waikiki Elementary School (WES) while integrating it as a curriculum or necessary components in classrooms. In-depth semi-structured interview was the primary tool to conduct the research. [9] Six participants (one man and five women) volunteered to share their experiences and understandings of p4cHI: two experienced teachers in practicing p4cHI (Teacher A and Teacher B), with more than 12 years’ experience, and two novice teachers in practicing p4cHI (Teacher C and Teacher D), the philosopher in residence, Jackson, who is a well experienced and knowledgeable p4cHI facilitator and trainer, and the principal of WES, Tabor, has advocated p4cHI pedagogy in WES since 1998.

**Results**

**Reasons for Using p4cHI**

Generally speaking, teachers used p4cHI as a vehicle to inspire questions and develop a sense of inquiry with students. They wanted to cultivate good thinking habits and develop students into better thinkers. In the classroom, the p4cHI helped students build vocabulary. The class created a safe circle for students to wonder and explore the questions they are concerned about. But every teacher had her own rationale to use p4cHI, and they chose the most appropriate element of p4cHI in their own classroom practice.

For example, Teacher A used p4cHI primarily in social studies, literature circles, discussing art, or just inquiries that students were interested in. While Teacher B often applied the reflection part of p4cHI, she stated that,

They have a philosopher’s journal, and they write about their thinking, their wondering, and how they feel about the topic. It’s good, because the ones that are shy, they don’t necessarily feel one hundred percent safe to share in the circle, they also have that journal, it’s private, to be able to write down their thoughts, feelings, and questions.

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Teacher B focused on the use of the vocabulary and the Good Thinker’s Toolkit, such as ‘what do you mean? What are the reasons? Can you give me an example?’ in p4cHI. She elaborated that p4c built up a foundation for her work and provided a structure with better questioning technique. For example, after reading/watching/appreciating the stimulus, which could be a picture book, a video, an art work, students started to raise questions using the WRAITEC thinking tool. And then used the Plain Vanilla inquiry procedure to democratically choose the question they like. Teacher C said: “p4c is really creating a safe place and educating the spirit of the child.” Teacher D applied p4cHI in three of her classes. She was most impressed with the questions that came from within the students in these sessions. She appreciated that students could “explore their own questions and make connections between what they were doing in school.”

Challenges with p4cHI Practice

The most common challenge teachers confronted was that teachers needed to make time for students to engage in p4cHI inquiry under the condition that they had heavy curriculum to cover. The second challenge is that students’ behaviors did not satisfy teachers’ expectations.

Teacher A described that, “I am not in a rush. p4c has shown me that I need to slow down, it’s not about everything you cover, it’s about going deep and thinking deeply.” She shared that it was difficult for her not to be the authority in the classroom. She was always driving the agenda in the beginning, but later she changed to focus on students’ understanding and thinking. Teacher B pointed out that she was “not in a rush” as well. Teaching for her was not only finishing the book but having students to understand as much as they can in a deeper way. Teacher C considered that limitations on time were a challenge that teachers and/or the school had to overcome. This is particularly because teachers had to follow the standards and curriculum, and students had many contents and skills to learn in school. She commented: “you have your curriculum to cover, and p4c is not [having a goal to achieve, or any content to cover], p4c is valuable, and it makes them better thinkers for all the disciplines.” Another challenge for the novice Teacher C is that she needed to learn how to encourage students to generate topics to discuss. Teacher D reported her challenge was to “reestablish the expected behaviors and to ensure the expected behaviors are being followed through [in p4cHI time].” Teacher D wants the students to listen to each other and keep focused on the topic.

Building a Learning Community

Teachers considered building a community is a very important part of their teaching. Because they recognized that in a safe and respectful community students can help each other, share experiences together, and cultivate deeper thinking skills. However, they commented that it was a challenging task for them to develop a sense of community among students.

Teacher A attached great importance to being a good listener and a contributor to the community. She said, “you could go ahead and teach all these great contents, but it’s worthless if it is not done within a community, and the respect to each other in their mind.” Teacher A reported that in a p4cHI learning community, everyone becomes an active listener and a deeper thinker. Teacher B consistently wanted her class to be cohesive. She remarked that she could not be with every single student all the time, but if they could help one another, there would be a lot more learning taking place. She also believed that, “developing community is not as easy as you think” because students “don’t always get along, especially when they are little, they are very self-centered. That’s where developmentally they are.” She thought engaging in discussion is an approach to build up a community. She wanted to “provide opportunities to have children work together and rely on each other.” Teacher C considered building up a safe community as a primary foundation for good learning. Teacher D also believed in “sense of community”. The sense of community would help students to listen attentively and care each other in the classroom.
Experiences with p4cHI as Philosopher in Residence

During the interview, Jackson expressed that people have different ideas of what it means to practice P4C. In Hawaii, he called P4C as “p4c Hawaii” or “p4c Hawaii style”, which indicates that Jackson’s idea of practicing P4C is different from the mainland U.S., Europe, France, Germany, Switzerland, etc (This difference was elaborated in the Theoretical Perspective section). When Jackson thought about doing p4cHI, the essentials are the idea of the community, forming an intellectually safe community, using the community ball, and being in a circle. If the community is not intellectually safe, it is not a real p4cHI. “Because intellectually safety is a way creating a particular kind of community… participants are free to ask any question they want, as long as they respect the others.” He said, to the best of his knowledge, all the classrooms in WES are intellectually safe:

There’s embracing part of p4c, which is community part and intellectually safe community, and I think every teacher in Waikiki Elementary School embraces, having an intellectually safe classroom, so really all the time, that’s in their mind: is it in my classroom intellectually safe?

How p4cHI Influenced School Environment

In general, p4cHI promoted thinking and enhanced a sense of community. Students became more independent learners and more mindful of their actions. Teacher A addressed: “It enhanced a sense of community, enhanced our senses of listening to our students, enhanced our senses of having a vehicle to problem solve issues.” Teacher B stated that WES has a “common language and the common way talking with children, the way of questioning each other.” Teacher C considered the influence more from the emotional and cognitive development of students. She remarked:

The p4cHI, developed our children into a more compassionate, and more thinking...When they go into another school setting, and they see things happening, I am sure they are reflecting and missing the p4cHI.

Teacher D reported that p4cHI allowed students to “inquire about subject matter, or just topics from within.” And it offered students a safe and respectful place to be able to speak about things, and be heard, answered and appreciated. Tabor responded in her email: “P4C creates an intellectual community of trust shared throughout all segments of our school population. Intellectual safety promotes more productive thinking around all issues.” Jackson suggested that p4cHI changed teacher’s personal and professional life since teachers could think for themselves and had excellent demonstration of inquiry-based teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the data shows participants’ positive comments on p4cHI. They were excited about p4cHI’s impact on improving the quality of students’ thinking, developing students’ interpersonal relationships and mutual respect, and enhancing language development. Practitioners of p4cHI transformed the “Western-oriented, test-driven, and teacher-centered emphasis” of traditional classrooms into intellectually safe communities of inquiry “where students and teachers co-create and co-construct their abilities to think for themselves in responsible ways”. [10] Participants appreciated the role that p4cHI played in their professional lives as well as in the lives of the students. Teachers worked together as co-inquirers and co-facilitators with their students. The results from the analysis of the data also reveal that p4cHI created a model for improving teaching, learning and the overall culture of schooling. As Tabor described “p4cHI helps us realize our vision of developing students who are deep thinkers, able to make ethical decisions. The p4cHI model helps create a safe intellectual community.”

p4cHI invites teachers and students to experience the liberating sense of not being in a rush. In the intellectually safe community of inquiry, students become fully human because they come to know themselves and connect with each other more deeply and intimately, they have opportunities to experience vivid, richer, and more joyful classrooms. Just as Jackson described:
I promoted [p4cHI], because I think it can make a big difference not just for children, which it can, but also for teachers. Because it is a different way of relating to children and classroom. And so, I saw that it had the power, p4c had the power to really transform classrooms.

This study pointed out three important and unique features of p4cHI in teachers’ practice: intellectual safety, not being in a rush, and inquiry arises out of the interests of the students. Intellectual safety provides a context that teachers and students co-construct their learning environment where a fundamental shift in the power relations between teachers and their students occurs. This is a transformative experience for both teachers and students because teachers move from the center of authority and responsibility for the direction of the lesson and the content of what needs to be learned to a community of inquiry where no one knows in advance where the inquiry will lead. Teachers create a deeply profoundly student-centered classroom and a whole different way of being with students.

Another transformative part of p4cHI is that teachers embraced a commitment to not being in a rush although they were under great pressure to cover content and needed to follow an externally imposed set of criteria. Teachers created time and space in their classrooms to inquire together with their students about the topics that students are interested in and the questions that flow from students’ heart. They allowed an inquiry to unfold at a pace not dictated by a clock, but by the integrity of the inquiry and the energy and atmosphere of the community. Students are not considered as objects to be moulded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility.

The findings of this research and the related scholarship demonstrate the ways in which the p4cHI approach to education transform and renew our educational practice. The recognition of primal wonder and the practice of p4cHI build up a school community that is intellectually safe and educationally rich, creating a place where students’ natural capability for growth is well protected and nurtured.

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References